ST. ANDREWS COLLEGE LIBRARY
3 1960 01035 0104

Nervous on the Curves

by Ethel N. Fortner

N DREWS
CTION

Nervous On The Curves
by Ethel N. Fortner

Poems 1962-1982

St. Andrews Press
1982

ST. ANDREWS
COLLECTION
PS
3556
.075
N4x
c.2

Grateful acknowledgement is made to news media, magazines and anthologies where these poems first appeared: "Five Years Later" and "West of Now" in *Oregonian Verse,* PORTLAND OREGONIAN; and "Accelerando", "Assignment for a New Year", "Beach at Newport". "Between Wit and Wonder", "Dial C-A-R P-O-O-L", "Easter Eggs Upon a Time", "Mother's Day", "Nervous on the Curves", "Saintly or Devilish", "Snake Stone", "The Holiday Inn", and "With Clasped Hands" in *Poetry/Northwest Magazine,* PORTLAND OREGONIAN; "Gold Medal for Peggy" in *Poetry Forum,* DENVER POST: "Repotting the Plants" in *Poets' Corner,* MEDFORD MAIL TRIBUNE...."Body Mask" in *Attention Please;* "Bread and Hyacinths" in *Bitterroot;* "Considering Signs", "Tell Small Girls", "Tripping over Wastebaskets", and "The Given Line" in *Blue Unicorn;* "Color of Courage" and "A Given Time" in *Driftwood;* "Aspen, Colorado" and "Decisions, Decisions" in *Encore;* "Two Weeks with Pay" in *Epos;* "Aubade for D. V. Smith", "Dear Landlord", and "Letter to a Young Author" in *Gryphon;* "Before Ping-pong & Nixon" and "Veterans Benefits" in *Human Voice;* "Farmhouse", in *In a Nutshell;* "Until Your Ghost Said Yes" in *Moose Magazine;* "Waiting to Begin" in *Song;* "And Not to Yield", "Brittle and Singing", Disputed Barricade", "Fortune Cooky", "Later We Talked", "Lifespring Breaking", "Lines to a Poem", "Low Fidelity", and "Unbound, I Sing" in *St. Andrews Review;* "Canning Season Begins" in *The Locust Post;* "Modern Siren" and "Orange Song for Betty" in *Voices International*...."Our Lady of Sorrows", in A LONG TIME UNDERGROUND PLAN (*Raindance Press* 1981); "Persona and Anima" and "Made-up Games" in AMERICAN WOMEN POETS (*Olivant Press* 1977); "Seas" in CHOPPING DOWN TREES (*Polygonal Press* 1978); "Noise in the Night" in LUCKIAMUTE III (*Contemporary Northwest Poetry* 1974); "Counterpoint to Melody" in POEMS BY POETS (*South & West* 1963); "River Ritual" in POETRY OREGON/'76 (*Pacific University Press* 1976); "One Day at a Time" and "Mills College" in SURPRISE PARTY (*Voices International* 1975); "Independence Day" in TENNESSEE VOICES (*Poetry Society of Tennessee* 1973).

Copyright © 1982 by Ethel N. Fortner
ISBN # 0-932662-40-4

St. Andrews Press
St. Andrews Presbyterian College
Laurinburg, North Carolina 28352

DEDICATION

To LARRY whose kind encouragement and support
have been a comfort to me

and

to all my friends, especially those who write
poetry, and to the poets-at-heart who read and
appreciate our words.

"....to create one's own world
in any of the arts takes courage."
—Georgia O'Keefe

By the same author.

A Sudden Clarity
1967, '68, '69

Clouds & Keepings
1973

CONTENTS

THE WITHERING DISTANCES
3 Nervous on the Curves
4 Brittle and Singing
5 Counterpoint to Melody
6 Considering Signs
7 Low Fidelity
8 Persona and Anima

II WHEN SUN BURNS AWAY MIST
11 Mother's Day
12 Noise in the Night
13 Saintly or Devilish
14 Dear Landlord
15 Modern Siren
16 Dial C-A-R-P-O-O-L

III FAR SURF BREAKING
19 West of Now
20 Beach at Newport
21 Two Weeks with Pay
22 Seas
23 And Not to Yield
24 Later We Talked

IV OUR TEMPORARY LEASE
27 A Given Time
28 River Ritual
29 Bread and Hyacinths
30 Canning Season Begins
31 Snake Stone
32 Lifespring Breaking

V HUNGER FOR CLOSENESS
35 Fortune Cookie
36 Aubade for D. V. Smith
37 Orange Song for Betty
38 With Clasped Hands
39 The Holiday Inn
40 Assignment for a New Year

VI SOME THINGS ARE ALONE THINGS
43 Decisions, Decisions
44 Mills College
45 Lines to a Poem
46 Letter to a Young Author
48 The Given Line
50 Unbound, I Sing

VII A HARD MOON WHISPERING OF HISTORY
53 Independence Day
54 Color of Courage
55 Veteran's Benefits
56 Before Ping-Pong & Nixon
57 Five Years Later
58 Between Wit and Wonder
59 Gold Medal for Peggy
60 Our Lady of Sorrows

VIII HOLDING AGAINST THE MOMENT
63 One Day at a Time
64 Tripping over Wastebaskets
65 Waiting to Begin
66 Body Mask
67 Disputed Barricade
68 Until Your Ghost Said Yes

IX UNTANGLING THE MARGIN OF TIME
71 Easter Eggs upon a Time
72 Aspen, Colorado
74 Made-Up Games
75 Tell Small Girls
76 Repotting the Plants
77 Farmhouse
78 Accelerando

X INFLUENCES & COMMENTS
81 Winds of Chance
86 Notes on the Poems

FORWARD

Ethel Fortner's style is her substance; her humor is earthy and refreshing and frequently to the fore. A reverence for the human condition despite her keen analytical ability marks her as a particular intelligence; it explains her keen-eyed sympathies as she moves about her own world and the often unkind arena of daily life. It pervades her work. History is there. The moment, too. I distrust any poet who cannot tailor, meaningfully, T.S. Eliot's "History is now, and England," to his or her own form. For Fortner, then, history is *now* and Estacada. The bell rings true.

The poet is a maker. "To imitate, not to copy nature," as William Carlos Williams said. That kind of admiration for the important, for the lovely, for the spirited, for the spiritual you will find over and over in NERVOUS ON THE CURVES. William Stafford, Ruth Moon Kempher, Winifred Farrar, Peter Zivkovic and a host of others have identified such fine qualities in Ethel Fortner's earlier work.

Our poet sees her third work now. First came A SUDDEN CLARITY (1967), then CLOUDS AND KEEPING (1973) and with this volume in 1982, NERVOUS ON THE CURVES, a strong step every several years. Regardless, over those years, she has spent more time on the work of others than on her own and with obviously unstinting generosity. She has been teacher, editor and critic. Always and without slowing, learner, and student, (Wagoner, Stafford, Simic, Kumin and others).

She melds present concerns and influences with the taprooted past. NERVOUS ON THE CURVES has tones and attacks that sometimes remind me a little of Frost or jar me into hearing Rolfe Humphries' voice, but it is really EF all the way. That kind of universality. Voice in the sense that Pound speaks of, "Culture begins when you forget where it was you read it." As Sanford Sternlicht of NYU puts it, "The poetry of Ethel Fortner lives in the deep flowing stream of traditional American verse rooted in the landscape of the West; it is clear that a heart that has lived fully and loved much moves a hand that has grown and is growing...." And so it will. Already I look forward to the next yield. Bravo!

Ronald H. Bayes
Writer-in-Residence
St. Andrews College
Laurinburg, NC

THE WITHERING DISTANCES

Nervous on the Curves

Along the Clackamas River
five miles of narrow road
between Carver and Barton
winds through Douglas fir.
Sun filters alder
ivy twines vine maple.

Driving this crooked road
in fog-patched blur of rain
eyes on the road are aware:
abrupt edge sheer cliff
battered mailbox
impending dusk.

Logging trucks roar behind me
huge diesel-powered.
I obey all warnings
take the curves as they read
drivers tailgate
resent my caution.

I taughten my grip and watch
pull over when the road widens
let impatient vehicles pass
brave the twisting road again
25 mile curve left
30 mile curve right.

Brittle and Singing

We head into wind
driving the highway
east of The Dalles,
watch whitecaps lick
the placid Columbia.

Tumbleweeds
free in the wind-strung miles
roll into furrows
leap over sage
vault the guard rails
scud along asphalt
get mangled by tires
or escape.

Tricked by fences they
hang
miles of dry decoration
random design.

In our spring rooted to earth
we were green and growing;
free to sing in the wind,
dry and brittle,
we take our chances.

Counterpoint to Melody

We sang as we drove
the winterwhite road
rocks on the mountain
rang with our laughter

Rounding a curve
we swerved to an edge
tasted the thin green wine
of fear
in that moment
we talked back to death

Our snow songs
drifted on the silence

Sharing
we drove a slow road home.

Considering Signs

MAINTAIN BASIC SPEED
impetuous always
pushing for answers
my basic speed was never 55
lines of perspective
held apart someday
must meet in the distance
but not for me yet

ECHO ROAD 1 MILE
a sound repeating
farther & fainter
a stray path
diminishing
to nothing
but not for me not yet

SLOW EXIT AHEAD
soft grey fog
an uncertain
river to oblivion
yet?

KEEP RIGHT
I solemnly swear
to keep right right right

Low Fidelity

When the letter
never came and never came
a silence
crisp
insistent
hard-edged
twisted my day threads
until thought drowned
in throbbing stereo sound.

After the day-noise
quiet
folds me in a smooth robe.

Night wires drone
across rooftops and valleys,
over plains to a town
through miles and miles of moonlight.

Under the layers i dream dark.

Persona and Anima

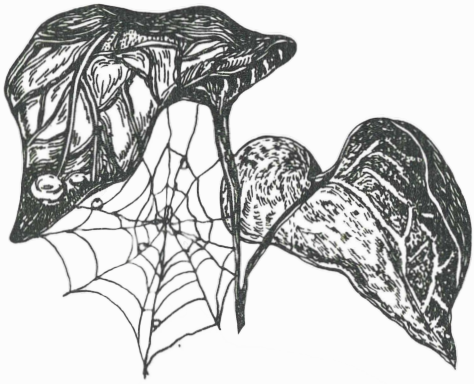
We traveled together
never quite merging.

His reach
outdistanced mine
until my stride
lengthened.

Today we almost occupy
the same shadow.

He will drag back,
a reluctant companion,
when I advance into
the withering distances.

II WHEN SUN BURNS AWAY MIST



Mother's Day

From the crosshatch window
in a hospital door
I count the colors of Portland.

After night rain a gauze sky
leans on fir hills
clustered with homes.

A boy in red shorts
limbers for track
and a black dog dares traffic.

Beige candles on Japanese
black pine will turn to green
needles and I will be well.

But today when sun
burns away mist and rain-beaded
branches spark rainbows

I am allowed
to walk
in this fresh but limited world.

Noise in the Night

When a sound so large
surrounds the house
the block the city
even He must wonder.
I cringe, sweat, pray.

Aftermath of silence
rips through dream gauze.
Was it outside? Inside?
Will it come again?

Dawn speaks in fog tones
to grey windows breathing
in the dark wall.

Through blurred vision
I count each bead of sound.
I can identify them all.

Saintly or Devilish

White Memory: a pristine cream-cone mountain
picture-book quiet broken by violence
(Richter readings excite seismologists)

Grey plumes clouds heavy with smoke and ash
clearing her throat she coughs up rubble
(throngs of the curious crowd West Hills)

Blue flashes light the sulphurous air
front pages erupt in scenic azure
(aerial observers round-the-clock watch)

Red images evoke flame and hot lava
the guttural rumble of her inner torment
(experts predict the glacial ice cracks)

Black crater jagged shards broken cone
mud flow and avalanche triggered by quake
(scientists record Saint Helens in action)

In nightmares I open my window to look
everywhere frosted snow has turned black.

Dear Landlord

(letter from a tenant who
wants to be a landlady)

Making the recently acquired house habitable
requires daily trips to Building Supply
x number of gallons of paint
stripping 80 years of old linoleum
and other repairs.

I always thought a broken window
stopped drain or faulty light switch
fell into the realm of minor, but
minor *as in* repairs *is obsolete.*

When a local plumber condescends to
(actually he was quite nice)
unstop drain & fix leak for only *$79*
tears of gratitude flow.
(He was *the low bidder.)*

I called the HANDY-FIX-IT *Glass Company*
in the next town about the window.
The secretary: $27 + $30 for glass,
$25 an hour for labor. Oh yes, the meter
starts when the truck leaves the shop.
Hello... Hello...Are you there?

I just bought a HOW-TO *book on minor repairs.*

Hope you are well,

Sincerely

Modern Siren

City by city their ads & signs
rope the women into a Spa world:
white columns, red carpets,
Mars & Athena. I was lured;
after the hard sell, I signed.

Dolls taught me the tummy toners
adding class to a dull routine
tiltboards & twisters, belts & rollers;
(what you put in, not what you rub off)
measurement & mirror point up the need.

Into the whirlpool, hot, blue & mineral
float the body in surging therapy.
Plastic ferns cast lavender shadows
where Hebe invites to Finnish rock sauna,
inhale eucalyptus & steam Turkish fashion.

Splash in the tank, orange lights ripple
on blue-green water. Swimmers count laps
others line edges with visit & gossip;
womb weary women & the bulging indulgent
exchange symptoms, my arthritis, my operation.

They're all here, ravishing to ravaged:
only occasionally the young & questing
to keep in ballet trim a singing spare style
but mostly a catalog of stilted locomotion
written in leg veins & bruise blue splotches.

The plaster statue flakes gilt in a fountain
only guilty of its nonfunction.
Maidens, svelt in black tights & gold tunics,
paid to advise us at so much per hour
organize swimnastics. The Gods look down.

I know about gimmicks but again I respond
and again to the siren song of the Spa.

Dial C-A-R P-O-O-L

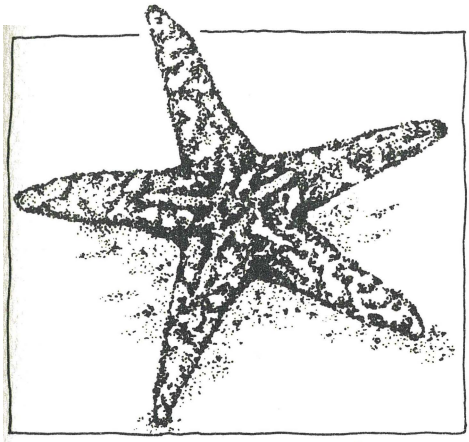
Beyond street lamp circle
rainstreaks
etch a grey morning
we huddle
wait for the ride

puddles glisten
tremble into rivulets
along the curb

Chev swerves the corner
showers to a stop
wind whipped and dripping
we climb in
behind the silent driver

windshield wipers
fight the rain
with a patient squeak

Buildings rise dreamlike
we stop
almost too soon
to face another workday
dungeoned by time and weather.



III FAR SURF BREAKING

West of Now

Away from clicking dial
treadmill pace
he turned into the wind:
walked wet sand barefoot
    waded surf
    coaxed
    blue smoke spirals
    from driftwood.

After searching
several corners
he turned once more
into the wind and found
    a place
    that needed him:
    wind-worn clapboard
    woodbine and gravenstein.

He settled and believed
what he could make happen.

Beach at Newport

I open the morning and lean
on a casement of quiet.
I had forgotten

wet sky
grey horizon lost in mist
green depths moving in foam white
breakers tumble and churn the sand
to amber and ochre

gulls circle flap touch down
each in his own wet sand reflection

lime girl white scarf blowing
strides along the tideline
red jacket boy races waves
parka man sifts pebbles for agates
in kelp strewn sand and the beach grass
bends in wet wind

I had forgotten the peace of the coast.
I close the windows and waken the others.

Two Weeks with Pay

Suddenly it's over. Fall winds
come storming on to whirl debris
across the dried-out lawn.

We pile vacation into boxes, latch
windows, load the car in rain,
check out and leave the key;
thunder drowns the words we shout.

The engine sputters, then responds.
Lightning splinters down the dark
as headlights lead us back to town.

Seas

I think that I shall never be
again caught out on a rolling sea.

A sea whose calm face lies in wait
for folk like me who trust in fate.

A sea upon whose heaving breast
our troller tossed with her unrest.

Go deep-sea fishing said the ad.
I didn't think it could be this bad.

I hadn't the stomach for the ride
on an angry sea so deep and wide.

May God and I stay home for tea
when only fools put out to sea.

Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late
to seek a newer world. —Tennyson

And Not to Yield

Time comes to kindle a fire
and burn the residue
of word years filed in boxes;
let projects hidden for later
feather in smoke up the flue.

Time has come to test gear,
turn hems and make ready.
(It is a promise I go to.)
I'll embroider my standard
and trim a sail for the sea.

Leave maps; I know where I've been.
I belong
where the tides
roll in long phrases
and critical winds are strong.

Later We Talked

I - That Afternoon

Pacific breakers thrashed against the coastline
detergent surf swept in left a layer of froth
on sand and logs and rocks as it ebbed.
Wind flung and rolled the fragments of foam
like gusts of children tossing odd beach balls.
We sloshed along with it until the wave hit.
Logs moved swirling suds filled our boots
rush of water heavy soft sand lost equilibrium.
Drenched we came in to strip
and warm by the fire.

II - That Night

tossing turned to dream
north carolina in april
there to read poems
kids at st andrews
come on a thursday
before they split
for the beach he said
I asked them about
the atlantic ocean
where they were going
would it be like
I opened my book to read
a pacific poem
and all the pages were blank

II - The Next Morning

Wakened to low tide calm, the far surf breaking
and stretching to smooth the miles of coastline.
Storm spindrift lay
behind rocks and logs
like white shadows.

IV OUR TEMPORARY LEASE

A Given Time

Icicles,
winter-welded to our eaves
offer a new dimension.
This flurry of snow
may drift and deepen;
we welcome a day
snow-shored against intrusion.

The patterns break
giving us time to ponder
our temporary lease
on the quiet earth,
trace frost ferns on windows,
observe the harmony of sparrows.

Sun,
blundering over rooftops,
loosens the firm hold:
icicles drip and glisten.
As they drop, we turn
our personal angles of illusion
back to the usual.

River Ritual

Smelt in the Sandy! Front-page item
draws fishermen to the silver river
darkened by the run. Hardy ones wade,
others claim rocks or crowd the sandbank,
swing their nets, sweep them back dripping,
sometimes heavy with lively fishes
to be dumped flipping into bucket or tub.

Home, we tackle our sinkful; put aside
a portion for sharing. Slit silver skins
rough to the touch, strip the white pulp
and triangle heart from a black membrane
lining firm flesh. Females are softer,
puffed with roe. Two dozen for supper,
we pack the rest for freezing in brine.

Smelt fry crisp as they brown in the pan.
Outside the door impatient cats wait.

Had I two loaves of bread, I'd
sell one and buy white hyacinths
for my soul. —Mohamet

Bread and Hyacinths

Dawn pours over hills
to touch the day with color.
My men
calendar their day over
coffee, bacon, scrambled eggs.
Discussion of hydraulics
diffuses around me.

Kitchen hours balance
against the May morning.
I have learned

to live within limits
but sun rays
reach through the curtains,
make an appointment with my mind.

I'll mix the dough,
pat loaves in place
and leave them to rise.
Beyond bread for the living
the day-warm world is waiting.
I go
to gather white hyacinths.

Canning Season Begins

A week more of sun-warmth,
our cherries would have been ready
darker, sweeter — but robbers!
Spread-winged raucous black crows
have stripped the top branches.
We hurry to pick, stem and sort
buckets of red-dark plumpness,
roll them to rinse in clear water,
locate stored jars and canner.
I smile at the washed fruit draining.
The cherries gleam back.

"The earth doth like a snake
renew her winter weeds
outworn." —SHELLY

Snake Stone

The fossil mollusk, ammonite
in old belief
was snake in coil,
petrified.
Unblinking reptilian
suborder of serpent,
he slithers with freedom
we all might enjoy.

This narrow black one
lives by our pond. I
watch his lime/coral design
glide through weed and fern
flow into water.

Bright colors fade.
Snakes quiver in cold
seek warmer earth.

I'd like to undulate
south in the wintertime,
shed some part of me,
feel renewed.

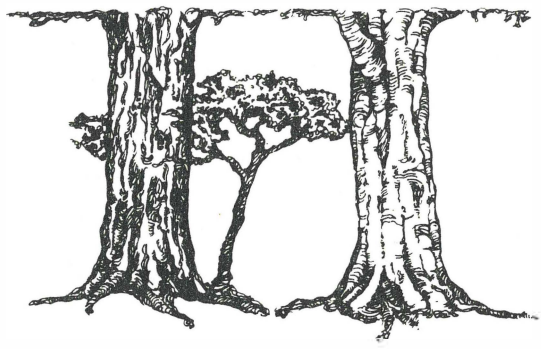
At night in dream I curl
into my nest and slowly
turn to stone.

Lifespring Breaking

There was a day
when a robin balanced on a fragile branch
rudder tail tilted up-down up-down
examined my garden, new green pushing through
grey weeds, dead stalks, red strawberry leaves.
He flew to a post among loganberry vines,
watched me watching him.
It is moments like this

And there was the day
when early fog lay deep in my valley.
Faraway ridges pushed through soft white;
ragged tops of firs lifted dark branches
above swirled mist as if unimpressed.
It is moments like this

And then the day comes
when my field path grows a carpet of clover.
Wild vetch vines reach and twine;
bumblebees visit magenta blossoms.
Green fescue heads turn dusty lavender,
bend in the sun to the soft wind rhythm.
Dry waves in flung fields ripple lavender-green,
a sea of grass flashing silver.
Alone in warm sun I move with the wind.
Moments like this have marked my days.
I never ask why.



V HUNGER FOR CLOSENESS

Fortune Cookie

You	*I am you to you* *you are you to me*
have	*to possess but love* *does not bind or own*
a	*as the alpha article* *holds words apart, free*
great	*first of all,* *significant*
capacity	*ability to hold* *the given loosely*
for	*to the extent of* *and in proportion to*
loving.	*the ways we fill* *our hunger for closeness.*

Aubade for D V Smith

Thin oblong of dawn
moves me from shadow dream
curtains flutter
doors open to the sun
the wind spells thyme.

I want to catch and bridle words
to make a morning song for you.

Once you wrote of perishable comment.
All expression is ephemeral,
a seafoam horse riding a wave
flattens on the sand
leaves a pale shadow.

We know that; yet,
Louis Ginsberg wrote, "Let poems fence
something safe from impermanence."

So let this morning flow and flower
bleed blue upon the page
in spite of what we know.

Orange Song for Betty

Her letter ended: I have this dumb urge
to write a song about sharing an orange.
Fondly, Betty Starr
(With a name like that
any song she sings
should come out right.)

Orange peels drop, oil clings under nails,
floats pungent. Sections pulled apart
are tissue wrapped, ready for sharing.

In flower language the orange tree
means generosity; its blossoms
celebrate the rites of love.

Go, Betty Starr, follow
your secret urge to that dumb place
where the sky will sing you an orange
round as the world and the color of love.

With Clasped Hands

You offer us this day
of sun on the harvest
to cushion our memories
as roof answers rain
clock destroys night.

We split open our lives
to examine the days
as we live them now
in the complex pattern
of our time.

Under Your steady hand
we name with precision
the limits of dream,
weave into harmony
shadow and radiance.

We refashion the language
for self and each other
to sing our awareness
of the space we occupy
for our time.

The Holiday Inn

The stranger
walked in snowfall
along alien streets
on Christmas night.
Window after window
sealed love
and shared laughter
in orange light.

The stranger
stood in the snow
to watch his children
open their gifts
under tree lights
and pine breath
in the hearth glow
of Christmas night.

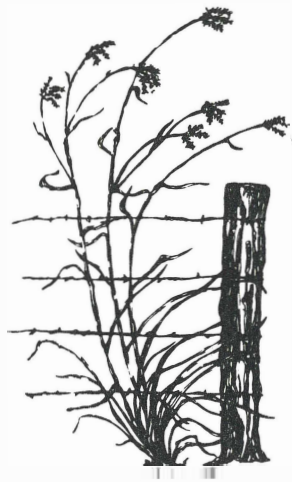
The stranger
turned through the city
of frozen rooftops
and street lights
away from children
born of his yearning
back to a tinseled lobby
dark room and silent night.

Assignment for a New Year

The request came gently over cocktails.
I looked at the tabled room
across a red sea of pointed napkins
where mirrors reflect glass and candle,
then back to your eyes. "I could try."

I thought of myself and then of others;
Monet fixed blue water in crusts of paint
to hold his lily pad reflections.
The liquid tingled on our tongues
as we explored new means and ways
making small splashes toward larger waves.
Talk flowed in halcyon mood of euphoria.

The room was crowded when we left.
"If I call you tomorrow?"
Direction cleared under a cold moon;
I tread water toward all tomorrows
searching alone where I know the shoreline.



VI SOME THINGS ARE ALONE THINGS

Decisions, Decisions

Wednesday
The brochure came; it sparkled.
(you sent for it, didn't you?)
I laid it on the shelf.

Thursday
A seminar in California!
(you haven't filled in the form)
I made out the application.

Friday
How long since I've been away?
(you haven't written the check)
I typed the check and signed it.

Saturday
The family could manage for a week.
(you haven't posted the envelope)
I licked the stamp and the flap.

Sunday
Is it right that I should go?
(the mail hasn't gone yet)
Please, Lord, show me the way...

Monday
Hurry, mailman, hurry!

Mills College

Eucalyptus pods
like green bells
fragrance the wind
scatter the lawn
turn brown.

As they shrink
star designs open.
This lesson
I kneel in the sun
to gather.

Lines to a Poem

News Item: New York City
is looking for short poems
to display to the public.

Shall I send you to the city
to replace a subway ad,
adorn a public building?
Where is this public place
New York has in mind?

People might stare, wonder,
or unseeing, pass you by.
Worn, faded, flyspecked,
you would be torn down
for some newer form of art.

Or might you be outside
buffeted by winter blast,
summer heat,
the sudden showers there?
And New York has pigeons!

I think I'll keep you home
and safe from all of that,
share you one day
in some obscure magazine
that only poets read.

It wouldn't serve the public
but it would meet your need
and my own.

Letter to a Young Author

Virginia Woolf
eyes grey with England
the sloppy countryside at Lewes
hungered for violence, broken crags, dry colors.
Instead, she wrote letters.

> *"I don't see how to write a book*
> *without people in it."*
>
> *Monk's House, Rodmell*
> *Christmas Day*

Dear Friend,
You need to desert your mountain,
trust yourself to mingle with people;
in daily encounter catch the excitement,
experience the whole human relation.
No one can see people whole but you
glimpse a nose, a shoulder turning away.
Enter the fragments and through them
reach into people, set them in motion.
I had hoped here in Sussex for time
and the certain calm that it takes
to fully explore, so infinitely desirable
is the beauty that comes from completeness.
What happens to you happens to me.
Impulse to tell stories lives in us all.
We're caught in endless wonder of words,
color of laughter, texture of pain.

Objects too near and vast need faith;
gain distance and the vastness will recede.
We achieve by our failures but fail less
if we are prepared to attack the whole.
When I see you in April...

"Why is it though I try to limit myself
to the thing I do well, I am always
drawn on and on by human beings,
out of the little circle of safety,
on and on, to the whirlpools?"

Her grey eyes stared into the fire.
She laid the letter aside. It was time
to scramble eggs for the Christmas tea.

The Given Line

I. WHAT TO DO WITH IT?

"It's cheaper by the T-square
5-bone quarter."
The phrase teased my mind
beat like a riddle.
Cheaper by the dozen when
one will suffice?
Cheaper by the pound when
a spoonful will do?
Nothing is cheap now
none of the verities.
Birth and death are costly
even love is dear.

Under night-closed lids
(without a penny)
bright green fish
swim my retina.
Ink-blue waves follow
darken as they wash
pale to cobalt to indigo
but in the morning
pallid grey is back.
Colors only play
when I'm tired so this, too,
has its price.

The phrase returns at intervals,
persistent beggar.
We wrestle awhile. Just what is
a 5-bone quarter?

II. *RESOLVE THE MEANING*

I married a meat-hungry man.
We used to raise Herefords
sold some & butchered some
ate 5-bone prime rib
stew meat, T-bones
& succulent fried liver.

Now hay in the fields
is bargained to a neighbor.
Store meat doesn't taste like
what we used to chew on
so it's chicken, fish &
casseroles with rice.

I'm married to a builder
(slightly unskilled).
He tears down sheds & shanties
saves the used lumber
trims the worn boards &
stores them in the barn.
With skillsaw & hammer
& at times a T-square
he panels attic rooms
insulates the porches
builds wheelbarrows
& makes apple boxes.

Sometimes I question
all this frugality
but he wears it like a glove
& it fits him to a T.

I threw this big stick far out, to be
all the burdens from earlier years.
—Stafford

Unbound, I Sing

Come with me, love, part way
but some things are alone things
like finding the right stick.

Voices from the past clamor
scrub the day's tables
dust the day's chairs
wash the night's blanket
dry the night's gown
I ask the voices for silence.

Wait for me, love, at the edge
of the forest. I'll find the stick
to send arching out over the lake.

Other voices call
come back make the broth
prepare the ritual feast
I tell these hungry ones
that I am hungry, too.

Water lapping back in free circles
will wash my cold feet. I'll return
to you, love, in the strange quiet
stepping softly. Take my hand.

VII A HARD MOON WHISPERING OF HISTORY

Independence Day

"Oh beautiful for spacious skies"
Kate Smith sings as I drive.
"When the moon comes over the mountain"
I heard her singing for the first time
....Depression, Chicago, '29.

Flags droop on the courthouse lawn
in still heat. Families are drawn
from blistered pavement by camper,
car land-rover trailer.
I see them at a roadside stand.
Dad thumps a melon, kids buy sparklers.
"This land is your land..."

Horseshoes clang in the fir-shaded park;
children shout, splash the cool river.
"...this land is my land"
Mother unpacks the styrofoam hamper.

News flash — the death toll, fires
Listen: the president speaks
inviting the world in '76.
Mourning doves watch from power-line wires.

Clide Brown Jr., 24, Alabama, Leader,
Long Range Reconaissance Patrol, 173rd
Airborne Brigade. TIME 5/26/67

Color of Courage

Black/green tiger suits blend into leaves.
Staff Sergeant Brown leads Team Two
searching the jungled heartland,
bamboo thickets, tangled thorn vines,
the sniper-infested swamps of the Mekong.

Codeine stops coughs; tapes keep out leaches.
Probing perennial twilight, listening,
tuned for footfalls in the bristling silence,
they hear themselves sweat
and olive drab is the only color.

Veteran's Benefits

This is the story of Richard.
He was four when his mother died
and his father placed in a mental ward
in the southern part of the state.
Relatives made him a ward of the court;
in a series of foster homes he grew tall,
gangly. Peers saw him as different.
School was endured.

Dick came to the farm to work in the hay.
He wanted the service (his Dad was Navy)
and it seemed a good choice.
Six years on a carrier in China Seas:
hospital, shore duty, discharge.
He drifted until his money was gone,
worked, got fired, walked off jobs,
borrowed, sponged....

One morning we found him asleep in the hay.
Six-foot-six, childlike, he walked unaware
wrenching our lives with his illness.
My hopes for him walked tiptoe
on a cobweb over a chasm;
the cobweb broke.
We visit him now in a mental ward
in the southern part of the state.

Thanks to its China Watchers the US
has a clear lead over other nations
in piercing the hermetic barriers
that seal the Chinese mainland from
the outside world. —TIME 1967

Before Ping-Pong & Nixon

the lists lengthen....

CHINA WATCHERS
search black & white
for hint of grey
add zero to zero
hunting a cipher
(a nothing? a number?)
decode a puzzle
with pieces missing
test for keys
try quiet locks
listen for sound
on postered walls
with new dimension

as the lists lengthen....

CHINA WATCHERS
will stethoscope the dragon
calibrate the twitch
of his tail
calculate a guess on
the future flip

hope gutters as the lists....

CHINA WATCHERS have been known to be (b)right
they are called draconologists

lengthen & lengthen

Five Years Later

Everything has changed.
You see that, don't you?
You have. I have too.
Rights were relevant
and we meant it then but
(too much water
in a fluid situation
where circumstances alter
so many cases....
those boys we knew.
This crush of emptiness
(has been flowing
as after any war:
the living lost wait
in the long grey area,
(under the bridge
and our flowers have wilted.
Let's go.

Between Wit and Wonder

Look in the famous quotations book,
Gloria, Betty, Jeanette and Kate,
where the sages (male) tell how women rate.

Listen to Tom Fuller of the English clergy
considered a wit in 1661:
"A woman, a dog and a walnut tree,
The more you beat 'em the better they be."
Well! The work to be done awes me to estimate.

Appropriate for all occasions? Quoth
Lord Chesterfield prior to 1773:
"Women are only children of a larger growth."
Sam Johnson, "and I like their silence."
Tom Moore, "and Folly's all they taught me."
Methinks the gentlemen exaggerate.

Woman is false as a feather in the wind?
"La donna 'e mobile," reads Rigoletto
in a libretto too late to rescind.
A man quotes men to illustrate.

What say we revise the quotations book,
Gloria, Betty, Jeanette and Kate?
Let Kipling stick to "If"
and Bobby Burns to "a' that."
It's time to eliminate some masculine thunder,
at least in the section between wit and wonder.

"I was very proud of being part of the United States Team. I was scared to death and felt so very much alone."
—Peggy Fleming
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED 2/1968

Gold Medal for Peggy

We watched young Peggy
go for her sixes
in a ballet of grace
beamed by telstar
from the ice at Grenoble.

Her lithe form
leaned into the music
5.9 5.9 5.9 flashed
across the board
in the moment of hush.

A girl who dared to dance
so near perfection
made us forget
for one silver interlude
the gruesome news of the day.

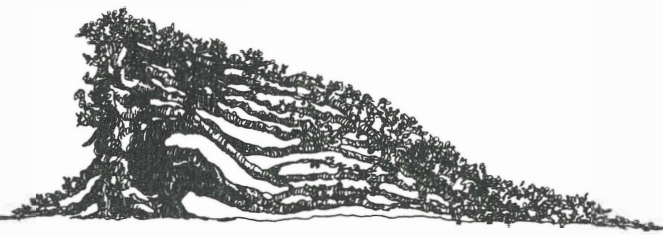
Our Lady of Sorrows

The mountain we knew was round
and quiet and white. A creative artist,
unpredictable, making expressive statements
with freedom and rugged individualism,
her performance altered the landscape.
We survive outside the accepted structure.

In our sand-castle dreams the ash
spews in billowing gushes of grey,
steam sears her raw throat. Exploring
her cracked and burning lips, we dreamfall
into the cauldron, hang on with the edge
of our probing minds to waken, walk quietly.

A hard moon whispering of history on a night
perfect in its darkness, hints at a chain
reaction in the Cascade Range. Saint Helens'
unstable spirit patrols the sky. Memories
of her charms confuse the luminous dawn.
Mount Hood has begun to quake. We worry.

VIII HOLDING AGAINST THE MOMENT



One Day at a Time
(for Eloise)

Ours was a gentle relation
built layer on layer
in years of shared work
and evening conversation.
I had been ready long
for this - our separation,
prepared to accept
the shape of zero
as full circle in days
heavy with unused love.

But the nights:
a jet crosses
refrig whirrs - clicks off
water drips for no reason
slow slow slow
wind annoys the windows
heater checks on - off
a car passes

Shadows dissolve
layer on layer
into another morning
of holding against the moment
when I can't accept
that oval as full circle
on one more day
heavy with unused love.

Tripping over Wastebaskets
(for Nome)

I light the fire
to turn the morning on
stare at our naked mountain
through the acid burn
of remember.

After being part
of one another I am
no longer whole. It must be
easier to leave than to be
the one left.

Wind embraces the house
a leaf clings
to the vine and I, too,
am loath to let
this autumn go.

Under the slow sound
the mountain makes
I bite down on this day, this hour,
its verity and put the kettle on
for tea.

Shared experience
Is not to be counted on.
Separateness is. —Melissa Blake

Waiting to Begin

(for Doreen)

I need sharp words to savor life today:
to find, in chilling shaft of windowed sun,
behind this first of unshared days begun,
a seed of warmth. It is the first of May.
To lead from this bare moment's disarray
unblind, to count the stars in hours that run
entwined with music lost? Thy will be done.
Each bead of time should help me find my way.

But source cannot be tapped when fragrant weeds
inure the nakedness of life. I try
the tranquil drugs; for me they separate
recourse to sound, the mirror face of deeds,
obscure the worth of words, intensify
the span. I balance, step by step, and wait.

Body Mask
(for Dottie)

She would have gone
the whole way, no matter,
but a gunshot in the night
left her dangling.

It was done, some said,
in the name of love.
A blood-spattered ceiling
divided all promises.

She wore her sorrow like a mask
to bind her body wound,
pulled broken days together
scrubbed at stains and prayed.

Time turned the mask salt-stiff;
it itched and chafed.
She began to pick;
it peeled away like scabs.

Patches, warm and clean,
of herself showed through.
The gunshot in the night,
an echo in a dream.

Disputed Barricade
(for my sister who chose death)

For solace in my loss I turned to find
a volume she had cherished through the years.
The bookmark fell from Frost and brought to mind
a poem to match her life; it loosed my tears.
"The Lovely Shall Be Choosers"? It was so;
with firm intent and steady undertone
down all the seven levels she chose to go.
I didn't know and yet, I should have known.

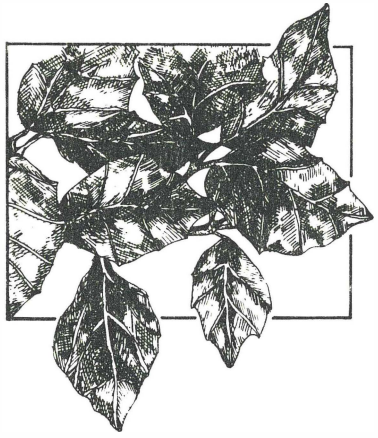
She leaned against the heavy door alone.
Three days she lay in coma as if she knew
that other needs were greater than her own
and when death came to keep the rendezvous
that he would take her gently, give her ease.
Her well-planned final gesture aimed to please.

Until Your Ghost Said Yes
(for Chris)

In aftermath odor of the cabin's cold rooms
I sorted and disposed until I grew numb,
reconciled your wishes with the packing boxes:
clothes to our sister with your bone structure,
records to our brother, the Wagner and Chopin.
Your poodles followed me, watched every move.
I kept the Wedgewood and Rose O'Neill Kewpies.
Church folk asked for leftover usables.

I remember you in your heyday saying,
"Druther die living than live dying."
You'd gather up clutter, hide it in a closet,
glamorize the table with a bowl of red roses,
cook a gourmet dinner, call in your friends.
When the palsy began you were frightened. We
built a cabin at the farm and brought you home.
Two years you tolerated the paralyzing
helplessness: Then made your choice.

Three times we rented but the cabin complained:
problems with garbage, noises in the night.
Housing was short; people came knocking.
Our NO VACANCY discouraged temporary tenants
until the right wanderer came to the farm,
an explosive Libra needing a space.
She brought her basenji and two angoras,
books and music, driftwood and cloisonne,
warmed the cabin with her gypsy song.



IX UNTANGLING THE MARGIN OF TIME

Easter Eggs upon a Time

Once wanting all colors
blue light in the red ink of night
ribbons down rainbows by day
I learn only one is allowed
search my acre of grassland
settle for fresh green in April.

Later wanting everything rounded
spun music complete in a day
silver rings gilding the night
I learn that perfection
allows no easy answer
settle for ovate instead.

My green will turn golden in autumn
with tag ends and irregularity.
I learn growing older
by sun challenge moon comfort
that much grace is allowed
in a stretched-out circle of love.

Aspen, Colorado

1879 - 1893

Prospectors haunted the Snowmass wilderness
hunting for richer mountains, found SILVER.
The magic word spread. Miners crossed over
from Leadville on snowshoes, felled logs,
trimmed, squared and notched them for cabins.

Donkey trains wound up rough trails to bring
utensils and food, tools and the men
to sink a mine shaft, build bucket lines
and a boarding house. Traders and craftsmen
rallied to serve in the landlocked valley.

With sudden wealth from silver-rich ore
folks built a town of Victorian splendor:
mansions, mills and an opera house
planned by Wheeler, swashbuckling giant
who dreamed the town and named it Aspen.

> *A wealth of quaking aspens grow there*
> *green and then gold against dark firs.*
> *Heart-like leaves quiver and shimmer,*
> *respond to the slightest movement of air.*
> *Natives claim quaken-asp whispers to those*
> *who joy in the charm of her delicate grace.*

1894 - 1945

The Sherman Act chilled the silver fever,
closed bank and hotel, shut down the smelter.
Boom town turned ghost as miners moved on.

Plush faded, gilt peeled in boarded-up mansions;
wooden flumes weathered, silvered in the sun.
While the deserted town slept for fifty years,
wintersnows healed the mine-scarred mountains.

1946

Drama came on skis to Aspen Mountain;
slopes of Snowmass, Maroon Bells and Ajax
drew sportsmen to the picture-postcard town.

Powdery snow squeeked underfoot
as villagers restored Wheeler's Opera House,
Tom Latta's Red Onion, The Hotel Jerome;
Victorian image reminded newcomers
of the fourteen years when SILVER *was King.*

In this cathedral mountain ambiance
a dreamer with vision endowed an institute
for the study of man: a transient in time.

Students and artists find a renascence:
songs in the streets, a haven for lovers,
lyric design and sculpture on the mall.
Silver violins throb in the meadows,
flowers blaze summer-wild there,
columbine, paintbrush, mariposa, lupine.
John Denver sings Rocky Mountain High.

* *

Dad worked the silver lode of the Smuggler,
fished the riffles of Roaring Fork River.
I am nostalgic for the place of my birth,
this town I left too young to know,
yet quaking aspens have followed me
like ballerinas to music in the air
they dance a summer-green translucence,
quaver my autumn with golden radiance,
whisper why I have never gone back.

Made-up Games

Barefoot children,
we drew pictures
in alleyway dust,
swam the vacant lot
island to island.

In woods we made
houses of leaves.
Our eyes
sparkled the rooms;
only magic entered
these doorways.

We are scattered.
Each dances under
a different sun,
cadence largo,
diminuendo.

After years
of role playing
we learn how much
our make-believe
was strangely real.

Tell Small Girls

A cottonwood grew in grandmother's yard
where I, a child in pinafore, played.
Suckers from roots unfurled new leaves,
grew sticky and warm, attracted red ants
and small girls. Safe in a sunshine world
I watched ants climb single file up shoots
and then run hickory dickory down.
I found a dry twig to disrupt their path;
they vaulted the hazard with eager ease.
I was four that spring playing my game
when a spider dropped on my skinny arm.

In memory that spider looms large and black;
I still hear the scream as I ran to the house
for safety and comfort in grandmother's arms.

When I came to live in this old farmhouse,
a mecca for spiders escaping the cold,
I challenged their rights with brush and broom;
my spider spray disenchanted dark corners.
With vacuum I sought out webs and sacs,
then secretly hoped the rain wouldn't come.

In caring for the farm I found new meaning
in seasonal rhythm, inaudible as dream.
My life flowed into the world around me.
Orb weavers belonged to this logical life.
Gently I coaxed trespassing arachnids
into folds of a cloth and carried them out
to survive in the bed of foxglove and fern.

No longer webbing the ceiling or legging it
across the gold rug to hide in the bookcase,
they are gone. I miss them.
I tell small girls,
"Do not be frightened; spiders won't hurt you."
With nothing to fear, there's no need for courage.

Repotting the Plants

These gifts of plants have grown into my days,
outgrowing pots as well. It's time to lift
each one to looser soil, relieve the maze
of clustered roots. One loves and tends a gift.

Small shooting stars in cream and orange
adorn Jerusalem cherry fronds
before green berries ripen
to red remembrance.

The Christmas cactus wears a special kind
of radiance for one who turns all thorns
to bright rose flares of love; a reason why
these gifts of plants have grown into my days.

Farmhouse

We have lived 30 years in this funny old house
already aged the day we found it,
now part of our lives.

I have to remember
the switch in the hall turns on the light
in the upstairs bath where the H tap is cold
& the C tap is hot; where I found a washbowl
with no overflow on the day when the ceiling
below was flooded in a room meant for dining
with the best of linen & silver & guests.

In our funny old house I have to remember
which things control which essentials like heat
& lights & the water. Under the roller towel
I grope for the switch to the outside shed
where the cats are fed & the wood is stored.
The little black button beside the back door
opens the garage by remote control
& the one by his bed lights up the whole place.

Young cedars now tower above the new roof.
Wood panels cover old calcimined walls,
our wood stove hums in its rock-walled corner
& storm windows help to hold in the warmth.
We have made this house cozy & rich with our lives
which are funny too, but dear God, we live.

Accelerando

When I was young and waiting,
dreaming to do, daring to dream,
the years were slow and long.
I leaned on a sometime tree.

Mothball moments began to unwind.
Sun, an hourglass, melted the day
untangling the margin of time
as tint flowed into shade.

Now I hold hands with the seasons
on days too good to let go,
tread careless hours with precision.
On borrowed tenure, you never know.

Darkness lingers into dawn;
autumn dusk remembers spring.
I hurry as eight turns into nine.
The years move now on wings.

X INFLUENCES AND COMMENTS

WINDS OF CHANCE

My grandmother raised nine children
before I came to share
her small home and know
her sure hand, the light in her eyes. [1]

It was my good fortune to be given into her care at age 3. She taught me the alphabet before I entered school. "Grandma, what is a-l-l?" "All". My first word, magic! In first grade we practiced phonics and rhyme fascinated me. I read my lessons aloud to her in the evenings by coal-oil lamp. Electricity came to Glenwood Springs; a bulb on a cord hung from each ceiling in the three-room house. Grandmother's canaries sang to us. Our yard was a garden of "posies", for hers was a green thumb. We gathered wild flowers in the Colorado hills.

When she contracted tuberculosis (known as galloping consumption), we were taken home to live with my family. Grandma and I had shared a small world of our own; this was different. I came to know and enjoy my sisters and brothers. My parents were strict; we were taught to work and so grew up disciplined. It was my priviledge to help with the personal care of my grandmother. It pleased her to have me study in her room evenings. Then, "Read me a chapter, Ethel"; I came to know the Bible. With her I had grown up with an appreciation for sound, color and the beauty that comes from the earth. I developed a sensitivity to the needs of others. Due to her influence, I became a student. She died before I finished high school.

At 19 I was teaching 12 children in a one-room log schoolhouse high in the Rockies, no telephones, mail was brought in twice a week. The children and I swept out, stoked the fire, brought in the pail of water from the creek. We rode horses to school, square-danced on Saturday nights to pump organ and fiddle. Radios were new then and opened a world of sound. We sang *The Prisoner's Song* and *Show Me the Way to Go Home.*

Correspondence study and summer courses led toward a life certificate to teach in Colorado which I completed in Gunnison at Western State College with help from the student loan fund and a job scrubbing halls in the dorm. My electives were literature. A sturdy, perceptive teacher guided us through Untermeyer's 1925 anthologies: Modern American Poetry (blue) and Modern British Poetry (red). I steeped myself in Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Edwin Arlington Robinson, then reveled in John Masefield, Alfred Noyes, William Butler Yeats, G. K. Chesterton, Walter De la Mare. I still treasure these well-worn books. I made the debating team and was invited into the forensic fraternity, Pi Kappa Delta, pursuing *The art of persuasion, beautiful and just.* We danced the Charleston and sang *My Blue Heaven.* Silent motion pictures became talkies and Maurice Chevalier sang *Louise.* It was a good year.

Later I taught in a coal-mining camp and lived in the mine boarding house. Utah Fuel & Iron owned everything in town except the post office. Mine families lived in company houses, charged groceries and merchandise at the company store; these expenses were deducted from their pay checks each week. That year brought new equipment to the mine; one man on the machine loosened as much coal in a day as six

miners could with picks. The men worked fewer days a week, families struggled to get by or moved away. Tired of winter snows, spring mud and the coal dust that settled on everything, I considered greener pastures.

The Northwest sounded romantic. I arranged for a ride from Denver to Oregon. Driving down the Columbia River in June past the many waterfalls, I arrived in Portland in time for the Rose Festival. Working for my room and board while contacting teacher's agencies, I applied for positions. The depression was on and the superintendents had been asked to hire Oregon girls. Wanting to stay, I made plans to go to Pacific University. Before school started, however, I had a phone call from Salem. "Are you still available?" I was!

Although I had been his first choice, the superintendent of the State School for the Blind had hired an Oregon teacher, who changed her mind and flew to New York to get married. He droved to Portland to get me. In a week I learned Braille, helped plan schedules, get classrooms ready and on Sunday we welcomed parents who brought their children with impaired vision to leave in our care. It was our challenge to adapt ways of learning to the need and ability of each child. This was a growing time. Later, as principal, my interest developed toward making help available in the public-school classroom for the child whose problem prevented him from realizing his potential. We surveyed the dimensions of the need and framed legislation to make the dream possible. Today most Oregon schools have trained teachers to help the child cope with a vision, hearing or speech difficulty or a severe learning or emotional problem. In 1937 I received my Bachelor of Science degree in psychology from the University of Oregon and married Larry Fortner, one of my co-workers, a fine, intelligent man with a sense of humor.

I have to remember
how blond and forever
he looked then,
the instinctive knowing
that here the road turned. [2]

We were poor. (Wasn't everybody?) A residential school considers room and board to be part of the salary; our checks were small. For recreation we played ping-pong, went for long walks, ate 5¢ ice cream cones, went to the 10¢ movie theater to watch *Lost Horizon, It Happened One Night, You Can't Take It with You;* we loved the whole parade of stars: Irene Dunne, Norma Shearer, Gary Cooper, Leslie Howard. We saved our money to make a down payment on a three acre country place, a house, grape vines, cherry trees, woods.

I have to remember
the first sweet grapes
and how the blood raced
claiming the orchard,
exploring the wood.[2]

When Roosevelt was elected for an unprecedented third term, we changed our registration to Republican. World War II disrupted our lives. Larry left to serve in the army. I moved to the Oregon Department of Education to supervise the new vision program, visited schools in each Oregon county to work with teachers and health nurses, help them

identify problems, advise on eye care and counsel parents. After three lost years the Veteran's Administration's rehabilitation program rescued Larry from the Philippines to work with blinded service men. He was stationed in Seattle; I resigned, trained my replacement and joined him.

Peace
brought him back to me...
From numbness I wakened
to live again and flow
in the depth of our understanding
post war.[3]

A dream had played in his mind during the hurry-up-and-wait army years: "Let's go back to Oregon and find our farm." His tour of duty almost over we began looking. Near Estacada, 30 miles from Portland toward Mount Hood, we found this 80 acres of land in fields, timber, orchard and garden with a fine old country house. He had worked on farms as a boy; my Dad always raised a big garden but neither of us had ever lived on a farm. We moved in and became instant farmers. If we were to have cows and sheep, we needed fences; to turn depleted oat fields into permanent pasture, we needed machinery; the local schools needed teachers. Larry taught math and science; I was asked to start a remedial program. (irony: I applied here in 1930, 17 years later I'm invited).

These were strengthening years. We went to country auctions and learned a whole new vocabulary, joined the Grange and got acquainted with our neighbors. We worked together harvesting grain, caring for the garden, building fence, tending the chickens, cows and sheep. Eventually we had over 100 white-faced Herefords and put up enough hay to feed them through the winter.

Out counting the cows
in spring sun; mothers munching
the hay that scatters the field,
calves nestling and bunching;
nine here, five there.
In the south pasture
a mother licking a new face,
wet, shining white; one more
than if counting had taken place
yesterday.[4]

The cattle did well but, when the land became more valuable than the cows we were feeding on it, we sold them, bought more farmland and subdivided; Larry studied real estate to better handle our property and became a broker.

After 34 years in school work I felt the need for time to pursue other interests. To indulge my love of music I tried piano but never improved to my satisfaction; now I play for my own amazement. I studied water color, became fairly proficient and painted until we ran out of wall space. Poetry had always been part of my life. As a child I read and memorized poems and kept a notebook of favorites. Over the years I tucked an occasional poem into an envelope labeled *Efforts*. With retirement I turned to writing. I had some catching up to do, for much had happened in the 37 years since I studied poetry at WSC. In little magazines I found contemporary currents

in literature; in personal and universal work our poets witness the times, the places, the culture in which we live in old forms, new forms, the wild experiment. I went to seminars and workshops, made a market study and began submitting my work.

In the sunporch, glass encased,
somehow a junco chanced to err,
found himself a prisoner there...

To save him from the cat, I caught
the feathered heartbeat, and gently then
set him free to fly again...[5]

Referrring to these lines an editor wrote, "Hold your poems, like your little bird, close to your heart and then let them fly." Sending them out was like gambling. Fulfilling my need to write, playing the publishing game, I was having a delightful time. Larry said, "I think you are a better poet than you are an artist and I *know* you are a better painter than you are a piano player." He writes a bit of verse to tease me: "With poetry I cannot compete / I have to take a back seat / It covers the room and extends in the hall / So I'm lucky if I get any seat at all."

I liked a quarterly named HUMAN VOICE from Olivant Press in Florida and they (D. V. Smith & John Frederick) liked my work, featured me in their magazine and the issue sold out. They were looking for new voices, beginning to publish books. One day a letter came, "We would like to do a book for you within a year." I pinched myself! I'd only been sending out poems for three years and the idea of a book had never occurred to me. I gathered my published poems, shaped them into a manuscript. Since they had liked my clear and simple language, I made this the title poems:

A SUDDEN CLARITY

Words
light and small wait
humbly.

Two people
hear or see in some way
alike

Words
ring out for both a sudden
clarity.

Two people
never again feel quite
separate.

Words...
How is it they can lock
two people?[6]

They gave me their *Voice of the Year* award (a share of stock in AT&T). Later they asked me to edit poetry for HUMAN VOICE. How could I say no? With their belief in me, I began to take my writing seriously; from a hobby it became an avocation, a second career. It has been my priviledge to accept invitations for readings, lectures and workshops, to work with poetry groups and on college campuses. One of the rewards is having friends among the interesting and creative people across the country who make up the poetic community. I am still saying yes to poetry involvements.

Ours is an active retirement. We have kept 20 acres of the original farm. The springs by the woods where the cattle used to drink have been made into trout ponds. Fences have been taken down and the barnyard turned into lawn (with his and hers riding mowers, of course). Dahlias are a hobby, a spectacular display and fun to share. Goodies from garden and orchard are canned, frozen or stored. Friends and neighbors are welcome to use our electric cider press. We edit a newsletter for and by local seniors. It has been a rich and rewarding time. In 35 years this home, this bit of earth, has become part of us. The winds of chance have shaped the phases of my life in ways that were meant to be for three quarters of a century. I still wear my grandmother's wedding ring.

Once distant hills
lay soft on time's blue margin.

I came a singing way
across the plain
to reach a gradual rise,
climb a tilting trail.

In the shape and shade of the mountain
lies the challenging mystery of darkness
I taste the fragrance of frost

above the song-spent plain
and keep on climbing.[7]

[1] *"Marked with an Imprint", CLOUDS AND KEEPINGS, p.18*
[2] *"The Only Constant", ibid., p.9*
[3] *"Two Wars Later, Amy", A SUDDEN CLARITY, p.26*
[4] *"Counting the Herd", ibid., p.61*
[5] *"Cost", ibid., p.64*
[6] *"A Sudden Clarity", ibid., p.11*
[7] *"Asking the Days", CLOUDS AND KEEPINGS, p.79*

NOTES ON THE POEMS

ROADS - *The Withering Distances* is a line from "Persona and Anima". Smooth roads lend themselves to contemplation but the scenic routes can be hazardous. I was asked by a lawyer to read "Nervous on the Curves" in court as one of his clients was injured on this bit of road. "Low Fidelity" is reprinted in a current anthology of *poems after sixty* from Barnwood Press, THE VIEW FROM THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN. Many of these poems have an Oregon flavor but "Counterpoint to Melody" goes back to my youth in Colorado. "Brittle and Singing", was written on a trip to Eastern Oregon College in La Grande where Carolyn Kizer, Rolfe Humphries and Bill Stafford were reading for Ron Bayes' *Ars Poetica*.

II CITIES - *When Sun Burns Away Mist* is a phrase from "Mother's Day". Larry came to visit and we walked in the May sunshine. We heard babes crying and I wondered if the new mothers were having visitors on this special day. I am not a mother but I have had my children over the schoolroom years, the boys who shared our home at crucial times and then there was Jerry, killed in Viet Nam, buried in Alaska. This poem is reprinted in an anthology of Portland poems named CONFLUENCE; this city of bridges rises where the Willamette River joins the Columbia. "Dear Landlord" is a found poem.

III SEAS - *Far Surf Breaking* is taken from "Later We Talked". We could have drowned that day. A request to contribute to an anthology of parodies on Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" brought on the "Seas" poem, reminding of another time when we were invited to go deep-sea fishing (5 a.m.) on a new boat. "The sea is just like a lake out there". It sounded great. Our hosts finally felt sorry for us and took us back to the dock where we staggered to our car.

IV EARTH POEMS - *Our Temporary Lease* comes from "A Given Time".

VI THE CREATIVE PROCESS - *Some Things Are Alone Things* is part of "Unbound, I Sing". Writing is a lonely business. We struggle for time to create. Much as I want to disappear into creativity from time to time, I still want him there to hold my hand when I return. And we might as well have some fun along the way. WCW says, "If it ain't a pleasure, it ain't a poem. All art is made to please."

VII THE DATED POEMS - *A Hard Moon Whispering of History* is a line from "Our Lady of Sorrows". Mt. Saint Helens in action caused an eruption in poetry. "Between Wit and Wonder" is one of my favorite poems for reading aloud. When I was writing "Woman Is a Oneness" (CLOUDS AND KEEPINGS, p. 63), and looking for an epigraph, what did I find? The quotations were all written by men, edited and published by men, and most of them were derogatory. This made me mad. I am not exactly a woman's libber but I agree with Judith Viorst, "When it's snowing and I put on all the galoshes / While he reads the paper, / Then I want to become a / Woman's Liberation Movement Woman. / And when it's snowing and he looks for a taxi / While I wait in the lobby, / Then I don't." Early on I was advised that protest or political poems, being timely, would soon be dated. I avoided including them in earlier collections. But now, as I look through my published poems, it occurs to me that they reflect the contemporary scene from 1962 (when I began publishing) to the present and have some historical interest, a reaching through time, and it is appropriate to include them.

VIII WIDOWHOOD - *Holding Against the Moment* is a phrase from "One Day at a Time". "Waiting to Begin" is a Beymorlin Sonnet, Italian sonnet form but the same rhyme scheme follows through at the beginning of each line within the first two syllables. I am not a widow but all married women are potential widows and I know so many of them. These are empathy poems.

IX NOSTALGIA - *Untangling the Margin of Time* is a line from "Accelerando".

NERVOUS ON THE CURVES

was designed by Kerry Oaksmith, Lynne D'Alessandro, Barry Anderson and M. McOwen of Roanoke Island Studio. The illustrations are pen drawings by Kerry Oaksmith. The type is set in Chelmsford, a variation of Optima. The book is printed on Strathmore Pastelle 80lb. text. The St. Andrews Press has published this book in an edition of 500.

Ethel Fortner's poetry is vital with unique imagery and enduring wisdom.

— CONRAD PENDLETON

So many poignant poems and wise ones, and that sense of humor. I can see Ethel Fortner's environment as well as her personality.

—HANS JERGENSEN, Editor, *Gryphon*

I continue to be impressed by the way Ethel Fortner moves as a poet. She never repeats herself, although her voice is clear and consistent.

—BARBARA BALDWIN, Editor, *Calyx*

Ethel Fortner's perceptions are subtle and form the real "stuff" of poetry.

—VERN RUTSALA